

Lonely crusade: Fighting the gambling industry

by [Gerald E. Forshey](#) in the [November 11, 1998](#) issue

In 1992, the county board in Galena, Illinois, voted to allow the Silver Eagle, a riverboat casino, to cast anchor in the nearby Mississippi River. Tom Grey, pastor of the United Methodist church in town, was stunned. No one had asked the citizens of Jo Daviess County if they wanted gambling. No one had even suggested that hearings or discussions be held before passing the proposal. Grey quickly rallied opponents of gambling and organized a referendum on the issue. But although 81 percent of the voters said they didn't want gambling in the town, the referendum was only an advisory vote. The Silver Eagle lowered its gangplank and opened for business.

The proliferation of riverboat casinos in recent decades follows a familiar pattern. Casino officials say they are simply expanding a practice that the states condoned when they adopted lotteries. They offer legislators the prospect of apparently painless tax revenue, and remind their detractors that people who gamble do so willingly. They market casinos as another version of a theme park, a Busch Gardens, a Disneyland or other entertainment opportunity that provides jobs and tax money.

Grey was not moved by any of these appeals. After the Galena referendum failed to stop the riverboat's arrival, he decided to challenge the casino industry on the grounds that casino gambling is a threat to the quality of community life. While the casinos serve certain economic interests, said Grey, they do not serve the broad interests of the community. Casinos claim they generate jobs and taxes, but opponents note an increase in gambling addiction, bankruptcies and crime. Grey gathered shop owners, churchpeople and homemakers, then brought in Bishop Sheldon Duecker, who quoted the United Methodist Social Principles and called gambling a "menace to society." That earned the group a conversation with the local state representative, who later called the bishop "an agent of the underworld."

Meanwhile, word of Grey's interest and expertise in fighting the Galena casino spread. Struggling antigambling groups in Illinois contacted him, and before long he was building a network. Arlington Heights Racetrack, located in a suburb of Chicago, was in danger of losing revenue to a proposed Elgin riverboat, and hoped to stem that loss by supporting Grey's opposition to riverboats. For a brief time there was a coalition between the racing interests (breeders, owners, trainers, track owners) and the antigambling coalition. But the relationship ended when the track owner began to lobby for slot machines and announced plans to build a gambling "boat in a moat" at his racetrack.

Many of the antigambling groups are based in conservative evangelical churches. The evangelicals' interest has translated into appearances on the Christian television station in Chicago and interviews with national televangelists. Grey and the conservatives agree in their insistence on "no expansion of gambling," although the evangelicals are against it on moral grounds while Grey's opposition is based on "quality of life." The association with the Religious Right has cost Grey some support among liberals, who believe that by working with the right, Grey legitimates their position on other issues, such as abortion and gay rights.

Grey now leads the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (NCALG). In 1994 a call went out to try to generate some pressure against a growing number of states that were trying to solve their tax problems by introducing lotteries, riverboat casinos, video-slot and poker machines, and offtrack betting. (The video-slot machines are especially attractive to young people, who are drawn to the enhanced video games.) Grey emerged from the meeting with the support of more activists--individuals and small groups that had been fighting lonely battles with meager resources.

With the blessing of his bishop, Grey left the pastorate to organize on two fronts--in the churches of Illinois and with other antigambling groups around the country. As a result, he got involved with people like Mark and Pat Andrews, a business couple in Missouri who were fighting riverboat gambling in their state. Grey brought ministers from conservative denominations to a meeting with the United Methodist bishop, and eventually forged a coalition that won a referendum by a slim margin. As a result, the Missouri casinos' \$12 million riverboat campaign was defeated by a vastly underfunded operation. Grey explains his effectiveness by reminding people that while the casinos have great financial resources, they have no constituency. The churches, on the other hand, can be effective without much money because they

have built-in constituencies and a moral stance.

Grey travels to all parts of the country these days. In Louisiana, scandals of political corruption brought out the antigambling vote. In Detroit, casino supporters won by only 4 percent and now face a referendum organized largely through the churches. In Hawaii, the churches and the teachers' unions defeated bills to fund schools through a state lottery.

While there are other leaders who oppose gambling, as well as local movements and national movements like Focus on the Family, Grey's leadership is undisputed. His approach is shaped not only by his ministry, but also by his army experience as a field captain in Vietnam and chaplain in the reserve. He believes that whoever is in a battle with him is his comrade, and he doesn't care much about their other beliefs or agendas. He believes that the higher one reaches on the organizational chart of the church, the more difficult it is to take action; thus direct engagement with the opposition forces is the best way to effect change.

One night Grey listened to village politicians in a Chicago suburb as they claimed that gambling would generate vast amounts of wealth and economic growth in their community. They refused to let anyone from outside the community speak, and when one village trustee questioned whether the economic claims of gambling included the costs of gambling, she was quickly silenced by the mayor. After the meeting, Grey organized an opposition group of five: eventually they put a referendum on the ballot and won. This, Grey says, ought to be the model for the church. It should travel fast and light, move directly against the enemy, and avoid organizational issues as much as possible.

Grey likes to tell stories and to be with people who have stories to tell. At the annual meetings of the NCALG, people spend about a third of the time discussing political issues and plotting strategy, and two-thirds hearing and giving testimonials. While news media like *Time* and *60 Minutes* cast Grey in the role of David fighting the Goliath of the gambling industry, he prefers a different Old Testament story, comparing himself and his followers to Gideon and his unlikely band of soldiers handpicked to do God's will. Images from Shakespeare and from popular culture also pepper his speech. He frequently quotes the St. Crispin's Day speech of *Henry V*: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," or Robert Mitchum's line from *The Longest Day*: "We need to get off the beach and move inland."

Because "perception is reality" in the political world, Grey has developed a wide range of contacts within the media. He has been the subject of major news stories in *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Mother Jones*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as on *60 Minutes*. Despite the emphasis on Grey and his popularity, Grey himself gives credit to the citizen soldiers fighting the battles. He mentions Monsignor John Egan of Chicago, and evangelical Anita Bedell, who is a lobbyist in Illinois for the churches against gambling. Grey once said that church members were like enlisted personnel in the army--they do the "grunt" work for almost no reward.

His basic strategy is to call for referenda. He knows that large numbers of people are against gambling and will come out to vote, and that referenda campaigns cost the industry effort and financial resources. But he's also hoping for a renewal of political life. He wants to fight "in the open," so that the public sees how money from gambling interests lines politicians' pockets.

In Illinois, for example, gambling interests gave \$1 million to Republican leaders for the 1996 elections. Grey wants the politicians to believe that citizens will scrutinize their efforts. Instead, he says, churches make formal resolutions and send them to politicians, only to have politicians file them in the trash can because they know that the church cannot mobilize any serious opposition. Meanwhile, Christian conservatives claim that the "mainline has become the sideline," and suggest that their voice is the one that politicians should listen to because they can mobilize voters. Grey appreciates the conservatives' vigor, but would like to extend voter mobilization beyond the limits of the Religious Right.

He is also frustrated with the church's left wing, which he thinks has been engrossed in personal issues such as the ordination of gays and lesbians, and has abandoned its former emphasis on economic issues. As the *Nation* said:

Grey's befuddlement is legitimate. Gambling in today's United States--repackaged, sanitized, video-ized, down-marketed and ubiquitous--is not an issue of temperance or free choice but rather one of social class and public economic policy. . . . The issue has so far been ceded--by default--to pseudo-moralists like Richard Lugar, Pat Buchanan and the Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed, who have been the only major political voices to speak out against the proliferation of legalized gambling . . . The highest formulaic expression of the New American Economy might just be "casinos plus part-time jobs."

Grey believes that gambling will become a national issue in the 2000 election. Both parties have profited from tens of millions of gambling dollars, with the Democrats supported by Native American money and the Republicans by Las Vegas and Atlantic City money. The Republican Party is most vulnerable because the Religious Right, a substantial voting bloc, is adamantly against gambling. This was evident recently in an Alabama gubernatorial primary race, when the challenger said that he "would not rule out new gambling rules" and lost, while Governor Fob James agreed to almost all of the right's social agenda, and won renomination. However, James faces a tough fight against a prolottery Democrat who is touting the college scholarships and prekindergarten programs that can be funded by a lottery.

Grey contends that he is doing the kind of work the church should be doing on many other issues. If school concerns, for example, were addressed by churches, perhaps these concerns would not be the stalking horses for gambling interests. As it is now, when politicians raise the issue of adequate funding for schools, someone in the legislature will introduce a gambling bill.

Grey's impatience with the church is based on his experience with the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, which funded his salary only after a great deal of pressure. His job was to help regional United Methodist conferences throughout the country to organize against the introduction of gambling, but his progress has been slowed by organizational complexities. The United Methodist Council of Bishops asked the General Board for a "comprehensive strategy to address the menace of gambling" but eventually let the matter drop. In a letter to a UM laywoman, Thom White Wolf Fassett of the General Board said that the board had an antigambling packet, that it was monitoring the Gambling Impact Commission, and that it was working on legislation to prohibit Internet gambling.

To Grey, this approach is typical of the church. It produces brochures, signs protests and holds conferences. Grey has something different in mind. He helped mobilize the Ohio Methodist Conferences in alliance with the governor to keep riverboats out of the state. The church must act, he insists, because then it will be taken seriously by the media and by politicians who believe that "perception is power." *New York Times* columnist William Safire said that "although Big Gambling's largess is buying influence in Washington, D.C., Grey's outfit has helped local citizens' groups keep beating the casino interests in state after state."

While the divisiveness of single-issue politics continues to be a problem for the coalition, the breadth of its influence is a strength. Grey can persuade Ralph Nader to address a UM conference, and Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition can persuade Grey to come to Alabama and campaign alongside Fob James. Pat Buchanan brings Grey and Frank Fahrenkopf of the American Gaming Association to TV's *Crossfire* to debate one another. Grey organizes black clergy in Louisiana, and speaks at a Muslim rally in New Jersey. An Australian member of Parliament tours the U.S. with Grey in June. Grey addresses the teachers' unions in Hawaii--and everywhere he goes he looks for activist clergy and angry mothers to organize.

People gamble for reasons that are mostly obscure. Some are testing their fate in a quasi-religious response to the belief that their lives are largely predetermined. To these gamblers, any amount of freedom, even that which resists rationality and tests Lady Luck, is an assertion of individual autonomy. The gambling interests would love to sell the idea that the church is playing "moral arbiter" and is telling these people what they can and can't do, like a sort of British nanny. But Grey usually wins that battle, because the media turn him into John the Baptist, a messenger crying in the wilderness, complete with rusting car, shabby suits, files in cardboard boxes and an income of \$35,000 a year (while Fahrenkopf makes \$800,000). The Gaming Association notes that there is a United Methodist church in almost every town, and responds to Grey's notoriety by branding the movement's members "zealots."

His organization's link with the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family and the evangelical churches bends Grey's philosophy. While the Religious Right tries to moralize the struggle, Grey is attracted to academics like Robert Goodman, author of *The Luck Business*, and John Kindt of the University of Illinois. Their research suggests that the costs of gambling are greater than the benefits. The gambling jobs, taxes and recreational values provided by the industry cannot compensate for the social pain--in the form of bankruptcies, white-collar crime, divorce, a compromised political process, an increase in alcoholism--it inflicts.

The difficulty with arguing that gambling interests produce more social havoc than benefits is that it is an argument about happiness. Both sides can produce statistics, study the issues with their own tools and then claim to be arguing about what is the greatest good for the greatest number.

The moral argument transcends the utilitarian argument. The moral argument is about the proper uses of freedom. The churches say that one should exercise one's freedom on behalf of fellow humans, and cite Paul's argument about eating meat: "If food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13). This position makes the gambling interests nervous, because the Religious Right, with its moralistic opposition to gambling, might decide to criticize the Republican Party for yielding to the political influence of gambling money.

The gambling interests of Native American communities present another complex challenge to the antigambling coalition. The law stipulates that the tribes must make a compact with the state in order to have gambling on their reservations and may not use forms of gambling prohibited by the state. The tribes have argued that they have sovereignty over tribal lands, but the 1994 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) has modified those distinctions. Tribes are now embroiled in litigation over the IGRA. The federal government has said that Indian tribes can sue if states do not negotiate in good faith, while the governors of key states believe that Indian gambling establishments should operate under the same restrictions that govern other gambling in the state--restrictions that include betting limits, hours of operation, etc. The tribes argue that such requirements take away their sovereignty.

Government policies have long bankrupted the Indian tribes, producing severe economic deprivation. Now, tribes have figured out how to bring about economic development. While they do not pay taxes on gambling revenues, they must use the majority of the proceeds for the common good of the tribe. But this can mean anything from using the capital to develop other enterprises to distributing checks to the registered members of the tribe.

United Methodists, who have led the antigambling battle among the mainline churches, are struggling with the Native American issue. The *Portland Oregonian* reported that United Methodist leaders abandoned an attempt to gather signatures for a referendum on video poker because the proposed initiative could have forced tribes to give up their lucrative video games, and the tribes claimed that this was unfair to Native Americans struggling for economic growth. Bishop Edward Paup noted that he would try to reach an agreement with the tribes.

Pat Johnson of the National Indian Gaming Commission says that only 12 of the 585 tribes are making much money. The great majority of the 183 tribes that have

gambling facilities (in 28 states) bring in revenues of less than \$1.5 million yearly. The large casinos are very successful, but they represent only 1 percent of the tribes, and Johnson worries about the backlash running through places like Michigan and Washington State, where citizens have suggested dissolving the Bureau of Indian Affairs and incorporating tribal lands.

Native American leaders worry about backlash too. Donald Trump has sued the state of New Jersey, charging that tribes have an unfair tax advantage. Intratribal rivalries about what to do with the money have erupted in Minnesota. A growing concern about addiction and the effect of gambling on families has led the Navajos and other tribes to reject gambling.

Grey worries about inertia on the part of mainline churches. The church cannot call gambling a menace, he says, and then give away the moral ground by accepting gambling as a solution to Native American poverty. Instead, the church must work politically to educate and pressure the legislatures and Congress to produce real economic development for the tribes.